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RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE  
RUEHVV/ISLAMIC COLLECTIVE  
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 0482  
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 1188  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC  
RHEFAAA/DIA WASHDC  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC 0657  
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SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN: LIFE ON THE STEPPE, JANUARY 17-23

¶1. The following is another of the weekly cables from Embassy Astana with tidbits on daily life in Kazakhstan.

#### UPROAR LEADS TO RETENTION OF NATIONALITY IN PASSPORTS

¶2. On January 5, Kazakhstan began issuing new, electronic passports. Complying with international conventions, the new documents dropped "nationality" designations which up to now had been included in Kazakhstani passports. (NOTE: In this context, "nationality" means ethnicity. END NOTE.) The nationality designation is a relic of the Soviet days when all Soviet passports included such information. With Kazakhstan's decision to drop the nationality designation, the only CIS countries to continue using it would have been Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

¶3. The absence of the nationality designation, however, set off a storm of indignation that unified Kazakhstan's parliament, the political opposition, and the media. Those opposing the exclusion of the nationality designation argued that the step would lead to "denationalization" and a gradual loss of ethnic identity among Kazakhstan's multi-ethnic population. (COMMENT: There are more than 120 ethnic groups living in Kazakhstan. END COMMENT.) Not surprisingly, the government quickly backtracked, and, on January 19 Prime Minister Karim Masimov asked the Ministry of Justice, which is in charge of issuing passports, to reintroduce the nationality designation. However, Minister of Justice Zagipa Baliyeva stressed that according to the Kazakhstani constitution, citizens can choose which nationality they want recorded in their Kazakhstani travel documents.

#### KAZAKHSTANIS BELIEVE OBAMA BRINGS HOPE NOT JUST FOR AMERICA

¶4. Radio Azattyk, the Kazakhstani service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, took the pulse of public opinion following the inauguration of President Barack Obama. Most respondents expressed hope that the new administration would bring change, not just for the United States but for the entire world. Some suggested that the spirit of change may reach as far as Kazakhstan, while others remained skeptical about the prospects for positive change in their home country. The deputy chairman of the Azat opposition party, Petr Svoik, compared President Obama to Mikhail Gorbachev. Svoik believes that, Obama's tenure, just like Gorbachev's, will be marked by events of great significance, but warned that Obama himself might end up with limited influence on the processes initiated by his own reforms. Seitkazy Matayev, Chairman of the Union of Journalists, said that Obama's election proved to the world that "there is true democracy in the United States."

#### UNIVERSITIES MAY EXPEL THOUSANDS OF STUDENTS

¶5. As many as 200,000 students unable to afford tuition fees are facing the prospect of being expelled from universities, local media

reported. Feeling the pinch of the economic crisis in the country, many students and their parents find themselves without their own means, or access to loans, to pay for increasingly more expensive education. In the last few years, many Kazakhstani universities have raised their tuition. In Almaty, Kazakhstan's biggest city, the average tuition has risen to approximately \$4,000. An organization of concerned parents already asked universities to lower the tuition and allow delays in payments, and called on the government to step in and help provide financial assistance.

¶6. The Ministry of Education and Science cautioned that the public should not jump to conclusions. While they admitted occasional cases of students being unable to finish their degrees because they were not able to come up with the tuition, they said that the figures given by activists are greatly exaggerated. Nevertheless, the authorities acknowledged the problem and the possible consequences of high tuition. Prime Minister Masimov instructed the Ministry of Education and Science and public universities to find a solution quickly, since, in Masimov's words, "this issue is turning from a purely economic one into purely political one."

PUBLISHER "DONATES" MEDIA COMPANY TO RULING PARTY

¶7. Yerlan Bekhozhin, the head of Liter Media, which publishes daily newspapers Aikyn (in Kazakh) and Liter (in Russian), reportedly decided to "donate" his company to Nur Media, a media holding company recently established by the ruling Nur Otan party. "At the time of this economic crisis, I wanted to contribute something to the ruling party, even though I am not a member," he said. "Just imagine if everyone simply gave away his or her beloved assets to the party, how easily we would survive the crisis!" Bekhozhin himself, however, does not see his own future with Nur Media. "I will think about doing something new, since it's not the first time I have had to start over."

HOAGLAND